Section III: Institutions and Approaches to Conservation in the Sangha River Region Introductory Remarks

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ABSTRACT
Although human-induced environmental impacts affect systems around the globe, the Sangha River region remains an area of tremendous diversity and ecological wealth. Currently, the region is faced with numerous challenges, including: (1) development of an adequate bioregional approach that incorporates all three nations (Cameroon, Congo, Central African Republic) and all levels of governance, from local to national; (2) involvement of all stakeholders in a meaningful, effective, and sustainable management decision process; (3) adequate scientific information databases in both biotic and abiotic resources to assist in establishing fundamental understanding of the environment and systems involved; (4) development of appropriate strategies for protected area design, management, and implementation; (5) development of sustainable consumptive (e.g. timber extraction) and non-consumptive (e.g. eco-tourism) resource management systems; (6) evaluation and articulation of values and attitudes of all stakeholders toward biodiversity and ecological integrity of the forest.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a particularly challenging and ambiguous moment in human environmental history. It would appear that today no region of the world remains free from an array of fundamentally serious ecological threats. We used to think that places such as the polar regions or uncharted areas of the wet tropics could claim a degree of invulnerability to major human environmental impacts. The spectors of global atmospheric change, ever more ingenious forms of human encroachment, and developments in extraction technological, however, have largely eliminated such comforting thoughts. Perhaps only the newly discovered deep-sea trenches and their associated life can still claim to be largely beyond the realm of serious anthropogenic perturbation.

Despite these sobering thoughts, much of the densely forested Sangha River region of Africa today can still arguably be described as maintaining extraordinary and unusual biological wealth, diversity, and uniqueness. Yet it is confronted with a host of impressive environmental threats and challenges. Indeed, the Sangha River watershed remains an area of such remarkable ecological significance that it becomes appropriate to consider how a coherent, comprehensive, and workable strategy can be developed for its long-term conservation and protection. The Sangha River conference, this volume, and their participants and authors can, and already are, contributing to this possibility.

SANGHA RIVER REGION CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

The impediments to realizing such a conservation possibility are considerable. Let me highlight just a few:

The first, and in many ways most profound, challenge will be developing an adequate bioregional approach, one which organizes itself around ecological rather than traditional nation-state boundaries. The conservation of the Sangha River region requires the effective cooperation, communication, and participation of three nations: Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Congo. Perhaps the rationality of this enterprise will overcome the parochialism of narrowly defined national interests, but it will be an unusual result if this collaboration is achieved. Part of the challenge of this governance will also be achieving an adequate and politically acceptable balance of local, national, and international governmental and non-governmental organizations and interests.

An additional and related necessity will be enlisting the understanding, support, and involvement of all important stakeholders, not the least of which are the diverse local peoples inhabiting this region. Under the umbrella of comforting labels like "community-based conservation" and "integrated conservation and development," we will need to find a way to involve all relevant constituencies meaningfully, effectively, and sustainably in the management and development of this region and its resources.

We need a sound baseline of data on several fronts: scientific information regarding the biotic and abiotic resources of the Sangha River watershed; the ecological, economic, and social importance and uniqueness of these resources; and what is scientifically required to ensure the maintenance and protection of these biotic and abiotic elements over an ecological time frame. An extraordinary diversity of fauna, flora, and associated hydrological and geological features characterize this region and endow it with global significance. We need far more scientific study to further our fundamental understanding of these natural features, as well as to determine how to use this information in facilitating effective conservation.

The development of effective protected area strategies will be a necessity and will pose a challenge. We may have arguably moved beyond the age of creating inviolate reserves called national parks to something more approximating multiple and sustainable use biosphere and extractive reserves. Yet the creation of core and buffer zones of protected biological and ecological importance, where humans are encouraged to impose only a light footprint upon the landscape, is also essential. How to locate, organize, and manage these protected areas remains an enormous conservation challenge.

The development of consumptive and non-consumptive resource management regimes represents still another long-term consideration in conserving the Sangha River watershed. Of immediate

importance will be establishing sustainable timber extraction strategies, which are both ecologically sound and socioeconomically equitable and effective. On the nonconsumptive use side, ecotourism will be a likely resource development approach, which will also require careful planning and implementation: the experiences of other regions of the globe often point to the difficulty of developing economically and ecologically sustainable practices.

Let me conclude by emphasizing the importance of one of my own particular conservation concerns, the need to do an adequate and complete job of articulating the many values and benefits people derive from preserving the ecological integrity and biological diversity of an area like the Sangha River watershed. We need to document not just the material and commodity importance of the biotic and abiotic resources of this region, but also the many other noncommodity benefits essential to the well-being of the human condition, including aesthetic, recreational, scientific, and even spiritual values, among others. For those who believe this activity suggests the imposition of an alien, foreign, and largely western perspective of nature, I would counter that it may be even more arrogant and elitist to assume that these beneficial aspects of natural diversity are somehow important to us but of no consequence to other peoples and cultures. Indeed, I believe if we probe long and carefully enough, we will find that we have much to learn from the people of the Sangha River region about how natural health and diversity can contribute to a human life of meaning, satisfaction, and fulfillment. We need to avoid being so parochial and narrow as to believe that nature can only be an economic and material resource to people of less industrially developed cultures and nations.

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